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INTERESTED IN PRESERVING THE BISON

The increase in the buffalo herd at Banff and the interest which these former inhabitants of the Canadian west are arousing, is a subject worth study by the people of Canada and the United States.

Since the beginning of the now widespread movement to preserve the buffalo, it is interesting to consider the discovery of the animal, its life history and methods of its extermination, says Ernest Harold Baynes in the Boston Herald.

Although authorities differ on this subject, the buffalo was probably first seen by white men in Anahuac, the Aztec capital of Mexico, in 1521, when Cortez and his men paid their first visit to the menagerie of King Montezuma. Nine years later the animal was first seen in a wild state in southern Texas by a shipwrecked Spanish sailor, who had very little to say about it beyond remarking that he had eaten the flesh, which in his judment was finer and sweeter than the meat to be had in Spain.

The next explorer to penetrate the buffalo country was Coronado, who crossed Arizona and New Mexico and the southern part of the Panhandle of Texas. In 1542 the expedition was crossing the plains, which were described as being "as full of crooked backed oxen as the mountain Serena in Spain of sheepe." It is from some of Coronado's men that the first published descriptions of buffalo are given.

How many buffaloes there were at this time no one knows, and probably no one ever will know, but there must have been many, many millions. The buffalo's range extended over about one third of the entire continent of North America, from the inhospitable shores of the Great Silver Lake on the north to the scorching plains of northwestern Mexico on the south, and from a line following closely but never touching the Atlantic coast on the east, and across the Rocky Mountains into New Mexico, Utah and Idaho in the west. These boundaries, of course, marked the limits of its range, its centre of abundance was the great plains region of the west, where at certain times, notably in the breeding season the animals gathered in countless thousands, darkening the earth as far as the eye could reach when at rest, and when in motion filling the air with dust and with the thunder notes of their galloping hoofs. Even as late as 1871 this animal was present in this country in numbers almost beyond belief.

A faint idea of the vast hordes which made the prairies tremble beneath their tread at that time may be had from an account given by Col. R.I. Dodge, in his "Plains of the Great West."

"In May, 1871," he says, "I drove in a light wagon from old Fort Zara to Fort Larned, on the Arkansas, 34 miles. At least 25 miles of this distance was through an immense herd composed of countless smaller herds of buffalo then on their journey north. The road ran along the broad, leve 'bottom," or valley of the river.

"The whole country appeared one great mass of buffalo, moving slowly to the northward; and it was only when actually among them that it could beascertained that the apparently solid mass was an agglomeration of innumberable small herds of from 50 to 200 animals, separated from the surrounding herds by greater or less space, but still separated."

It is conservatively estimated that Colonel Dodge saw at least 500,000 buffaloes, and these were but a fraction of a great herd of at least 4,000,000, an army greater in number than all the men, women and children in Greater New York put together. The Indians of some of the tribes used to think that the buffaloes issued from the earth in an unfailing stream, and, indeed, it might readily seem difficult to account for such numbers in any other way. Is it any wonder that many men believed that it was quite impossible to exterminate the bison? Yet in the short space of a dozen years from the date on which Colonel Dodge passed through that herd of 4,000,000 the buffalo had ceased to exist as a wild animal in this country.

The buffalo was gregarious in its habits and at certain seasons the herds were larger and more compact than at others. Especially was this true of the breeding season, which came chiefly in July and August. Then vast hordes gathered on the plains, which were the scenes of the greatest activity for several weeks, during which the roaring of the bulls was continuous and could be heard for miles. There was also much

fighting among the bulls. After the breeding season the herds became less densely massed. The compact herds dissolved into groups of from 20 to a hundred or two, and the usual peaceful life was resumed.

There is no doubt that buffaloes were migratory, but their migrations were probably not nearly so extensive as many people have supposed. In their ordinary wanderings, buffaloes frequently travelled far away from water but as they became thirsty the herd would start in search of some spring or water course. The principal trails usually extended north and south and connected the rivers which, in the main, run east and west. Such trails also led to the great salt licks, such as the Big Bone Lick in Kentucky, which was frequented by buffaloes in vast numbers up to the beginning of the last century, when, of course, the animal disappeared forever from the country east of the Mississippi.

Considering the great weight of the animal, the gallop of the buffalo is a very easy, elastic movement. In the wild state the buffalo was a very sure-footed animal and a good climber. It not only ascended steep mountains along narrow ledges, where it would have been impossible for a horse or even a mule to have followed, but was able to leap downward in places where there was a sheer descent of several feet and alight in safety on the rocks below.